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# SMS Messages: A Multiplier of Media Economy and Index of Democratization

CSHN Murthy\*  
Devesh Kishore\*\*

## Abstract

*The SMS messaging, which was introduced into electronic media in the late 1990s, has revolutionized the media economy both as a money spinner and as an efficient strategy to build the brand image of not only sponsoring brands but also the very telecommunication networks which support the SMS messaging. Though a lot of data pertaining to the precise way the SMS messaging has become an influential factor in branding is not available, based on the current scenario of application of SMS messaging in the television programs, certain important gleanings could be made to understand how this important area of media economy is performing a very complex and manifold role in brand image building far beyond our imagination. The present paper, first of its kind, endeavors to work out certain basic presumptions in theorizing on the working of SMS messaging in brand image building both as a multiplier of media economy and as an index of democratization.*

## Introduction

The SMS message service and the mobile phone entered the Indian telecommunications almost at a time in late 1990s. Earlier the pagers were considered as precursors to SMS message service on the mobiles. But the SMS messages were initially introduced in the mobile sector to enhance the convenience of the public in general to exchange both the pleasantries and concerns (P2P Messaging). Even messaging was digitally done from landline to mobile phones and land line to land line where the facility to read the messages was available (K.Giridhar Gopal, 2007). Further the messages can also be sent to mobile phone via special email address, carrier's website or special messaging software. SMS messaging is becoming increasingly popular form of communication due to the economics of text messaging versus being on line. The key advantages of text messaging in comparison to being on line, writes Giridhar Gopal, include a user's ability to text people independent of computer access, rather than only being able to communicate when logged onto the internet, it is less intrusive than a phone call, and it is less expensive than a phone call.

In that sense the SMS messages are purely linear and are treated as interpersonal communications falling within the definition of Laswellian model of communication. But very

\*Professor, School of Journalism and Mass Communication, Institute of Management Studies, Noida

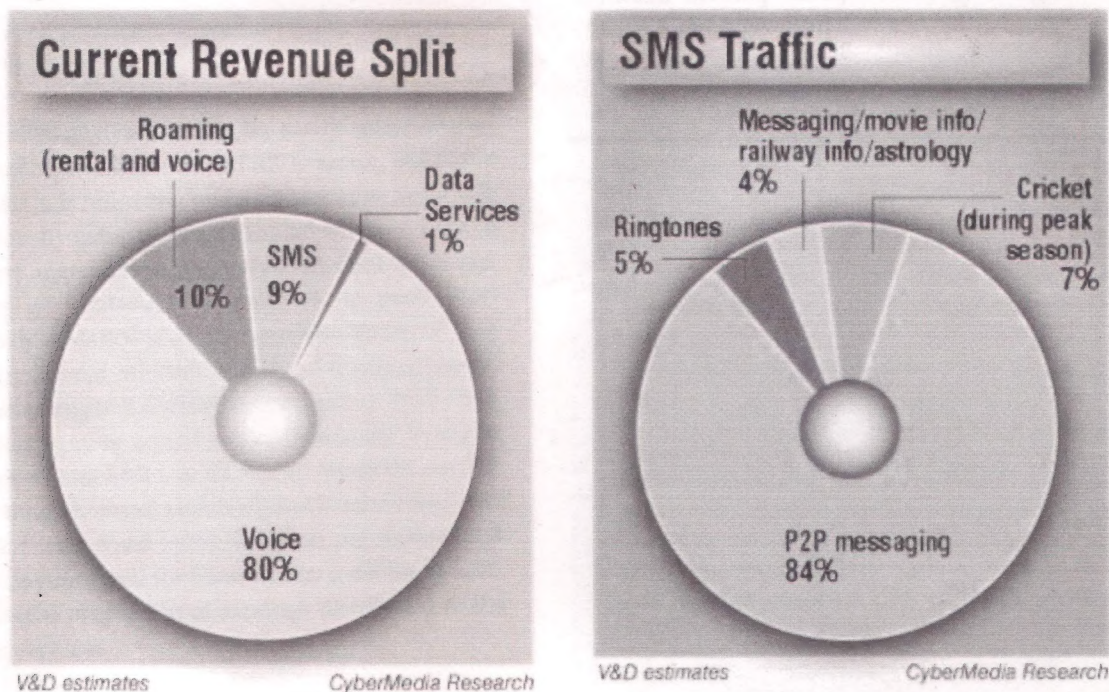
\*\*Dean, School of Journalism & Mass Communication, Institute of Management Studies, Noida



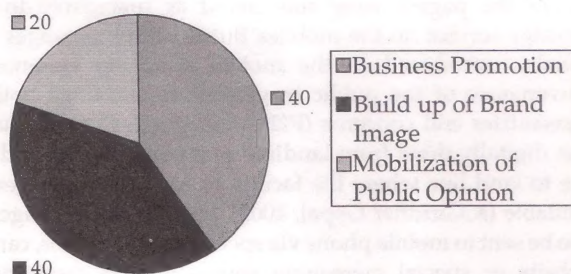
soon the SMS messages have become a routine between mobile to mobile more than a landline to mobile and therefore turned out to be an unavoidable part of convergence of technologies and tools of mass communication involving telecommunication networks in a big way. The spread of SMS messages has become so vast and fast by the turn of the

millennium that almost all kinds of television channels and the FM radios began to use the convergence of SMS messaging via telephone network to a given television or radio program for a quick feedback mechanism both for the entertainment purpose and for the purpose of eliciting public view on serious matters of public or national importance (See Fig 1).

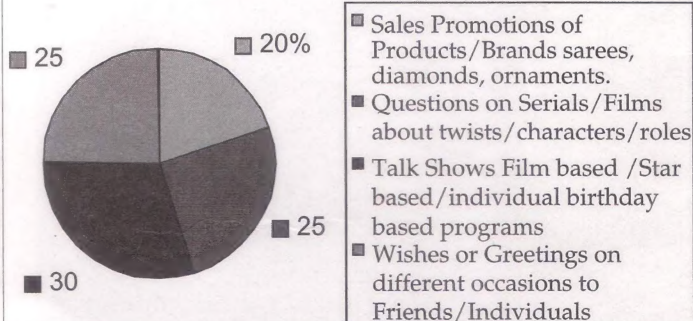
**Fig.1. Revenue Split of Mobile Operators**  
(Does not include the SMS messaging to TV/Radio Channels)



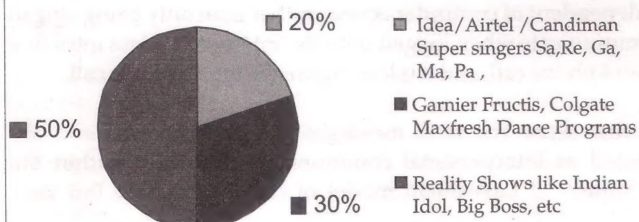
**Fig.1 a**  
Pie Chart Showing SMS Message Strategies in Various TV Programs (based on the approximation of number of programs falling under each category)



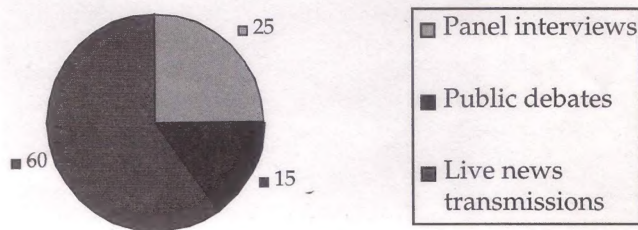
**Fig. 1b**  
Break up of Various Brand Promotion Programs Using SMS Messages in TV



**Fig.1c.**  
Break up of Brand Image Building of Various Programs on TV



**Fig. 1d**  
Break Up of Mobilization of Public Opinion on Issues on News TV Programs





The SMS messages have therefore begun to acquire the contours of commercial entertainment and constitute a feedback mechanism proposed by the Osgood and Wilbur

Schramm Circular Model (Wilbur Schramm, 1964) with the electronic media using it for various purposes among which the increased number of SMS messages is construed as a measure of better Television Rating Point (TRPs). As such the SMS message service is seen both as a multiplier of media economy and index of increasing public participation and expression in the programs of electronic media both the television and the FM Radio. Denis Mcquail and Windhal (1993) described the increasing participation of people in any program or activity as a first step to democratization, and the efficient use of the feedback provided by the participants thus constituted a way forward in building up a healthy democracy.

The present article deals with the multifaceted roles of the SMS messages with respect to i. Acceleration of business or Business promotion ii. Building up of a brand image of a product or an individual and iii. Mobilizing a public opinion in favor or against a public issue of concern (See Fig.2).

Whereas the first two fall under the entertainment programs of the electronic media reflecting the enlightenment through delightment, the third one falls under the news dissemination which deals with the level of infotainment or edutainment as conceived by Singhal and Rogers. Further the SMS messages in respect of the first two categories are incentive driven and are highly competitive. However, the SMS messages in respect of the third category reflect the level of awareness, sense of commitment and increased identification with the issues in question per se. In fact these characteristics of SMS messaging perfectly fit into the concepts of media economy, democratization and mediated marketing communication which is also known as integrated marketing communication.

According to Phillip Kotler 'innovations and diffusions' is part of integrated marketing communications and constitutes one of the most important marketing strategies for a product evaluation to determine the customer needs through which better services could be rendered to the valued customers (Philip Kotler, Kevin L Keller, Abraham Koshy and Mithileshwar Jha, 2007: 448; Everett M Rogers, 1962; 79-86).

## Literature Review

In our literature survey we have hardly found any substantial previous work or literature done on this crucial aspect of media economy and democratization. However, out of a couple of articles retrieved, one article tried to deal with the SMS messaging in general (K.Giridhar Gopal, 2007) and its growing importance in the future while another article dealt with the reality shows per se though there were only some stray mentions of the income these reality shows generated through SMS messages (Debashish Sengupta, 2009). Though some information is available on the web links about the money spinning ability of the present television programs using SMS messages, a lot of emphasis is placed on the Sony Channel's Indian Idol program alone which sent the cash chests ringing for the producers as well as the television channel besides the telecom providers.

## Objectives of the Study

### The study attempts to

- i. Gain insights into the current strategies of marketing used by the television channels through SMS messaging using telephone networks of both public and private service providers (BSNL and MTNL, Reliance, Tata- Indicom, AIR TEL, Idea, etc).
- ii. explore how the use of SMS messaging by television channels achieved a two fold objective in terms of media economy.
- iii. show how, apart from the quid pro quo relationship between the television channels and the FMCG (Fast Moving Consumer Goods) brands, the telecommunication net work providers are concomitant beneficiaries-- both as brands and brand image builders directly and indirectly (See Fig.3).

## Methodology

The methodology adopted in the present work is based on historiography, and is descriptive and analytical.

1. Firstly the study would deal with how the television channels used the SMS messaging for their own TRPs and evaluation of audience responses;
2. Secondly the study would also focus on how the sponsors (of FMCG and Non-FMCG products) benefited by the increasing participation through SMS messaging.
3. Thirdly, the study would deal with the telecom service providers' twin gains both as brands (as service providers) as well as high income beneficiaries too.

## Sample of the Study

A convenience sample of a few entertainment and news TV channels has been chosen and observed for the density of the programs using SMS messaging to meet various purposes outlined in the categories below. Some of the channels selected are from Hindi (Entertainment Channels) and some channels selected are from English (News Channels). As for news channels, we have taken three prominent English news channels.

### Period of Observation

The channels were observed with respect to their programs using SMS messages for a period of 30 days on regular basis.

### Criteria of Observation

The following criteria had been adopted for the scrutiny of the programs and selection of programs for the final approximation of total such programs telecast in each channel and all channels under the study put together.

1. How the programs are using the SMS strategy for business promotion, brand image building or mobilization of public opinion or for the others?
2. How television channels are using the SMS messaging as strategy for boosting their own TRPs and for increasing their revenues? (High intensity and low intensity SMS messaging)?



**TV Channels (Entertainment)**

1. SONY TV (Hindi)
2. ZEE TV (Hindi)
3. STAR TV (Hindi)

**TV Channels (News)**

1. NDTV 24x7 (English)
2. TIMES NOW (English)
3. HEADLINES TODAY (English)

Based on the data of observation, approximations of the total programs under each category have been done to develop the pie charts which are shown in Figs. 1a to d.

**Definition of the terms in discourse**

The study is first of its kind and effort, and is primarily interdisciplinary in nature. Therefore, some of the terms in the study need to be defined within the parameters they have been considered. The study applied the terms like media economy and democratization as the primary constituents acting as the major forces driving the whole concept of the paper. Therefore, these two terms are first defined here.

**Media Economy**

Any financial gain through business or commerce using 'media' both as medium and message is construed as 'media economy'. Here the term 'media' is used in its widest sense. It includes both traditional media like telecommunications, radio and television and alternate media (such as e mail, etc).

**Democratization**

The Indian Constitution has granted certain fundamental rights to its citizens. Of which, the freedom of expression granted under article 19 1(a) is considered the most precious and invaluable as it is through this the citizen in India is freely able to express his opinion regarding any measure whether it is a government policy or a consumer choice. The freedom of expression found its value in the public expression of their views regarding their choicest brands, heroes and heroines, programs and tastes. This has also given an opportunity for the Indian populace to lend a collective voice or opinions on the issues of public concern/safety (and security) including corruption, criminalization of politics and erosion of values in judiciary.

**Categorization of Programs using SMS Messaging on the TV Channels**

As pointed earlier, the SMS messages have become an inseparable component in almost all the television programs. Though for the sake of convenience we have classified the television channels into two groups, one as entertainment and another as news related, the classification is not to be deemed as any hard separation. In fact, the news is being transmitted on entertainment channels and the news channels transmit the entertainment from the film and theatre would suggest that no such hard separation is possible. Though the SMS messages are being used for all the programs in both kinds of channels, the classification is considered essential to give a focused treatment to the programs which involve the SMS messages for

varied purposes in most of the cases the involvement being in respect to the specific cause too. Towards this, following classification will help understand the process of SMS message involvement in the programs (Fig.2).

- i. Acceleration of business or Business promotion
- ii. Building up of a brand image of a product or an individual and
- iii. Mobilizing a public opinion in favor or against a public issue of concern

Each of the categories consists of a number of sub-categories falling within its domain.

- i. **Acceleration of business or Business promotion (ENTERTAINMENT CHANNELS INCLUDING MUSIC)**
  - a. Sale of Sarees, Diamonds, women programs Sports Related questions, etc
  - b. Questions on Serials or Films regarding roles/names of actors
  - c. Talk shows film based/actors birthday based
- ii. **Build up of Brand Image (ENTERTAINMENT CHANNELS INCLUDING MUSIC)**
  - a. Idea/Airtel/Candiman Super singers, Sa, Re, Ga, Ma, Pa
  - b. Garnier Fructis, Colgate Maxfresh
  - c. Reality Shows like Indian Idol, Big Boss, etc
- iii. **Mobilizing Public Opinion on an Issue (IN NEWS/IN NEWS CHANNELS)**
  - a. Panel interviews
  - b. Public debates
  - c. Live news transmissions

In our close scrutiny we have also found that there can be a conceptual classification of the programs also based on the expected outcomes which use SMS strategies for various purposes. We have identified four broad categories which could be applicable to any category of programme being beamed by a TV channel.

**Categorization of Conceptual Outcomes of SMS Messaging**

1. Incentive based SMS Strategy for Brand Sales or Promotion. (Among SMS messages a lucky winner will be chosen)
2. Opinion or brand image building up through SMS Strategy. Eg. Indian Idol, Sa, Re, Ga, Ma, Pa, Big Boss, etc.
3. Opinion Survey through SMS strategy for Film Fare/Femina and Film Goers Awards.
4. SMS message strategy for an opinion survey on public issues of need and concern or justice.

**Discussion**

In the first instance we have identified the programs which used the SMS messages for the purpose of i. boosting the TV channel's image, ii. promoting the sales of the products of a brand or iii. protecting and boosting the image of a brand, iv. providing space for the friends and relatives to socialize through sending greetings and best wishes vi. taking an



opinion survey with respect to their favorite films and actors, anchors and tele-serials, v. calling for an opinion on public issue of concern, etc. Secondly we have identified the intensity of the application of the SMS messages being sought by both the television channels as well the program sponsoring brands. Whether or not a programme must get high intensity of SMS messages depends largely on the programme itself or on the objectives of the sponsor (say brand). As such the TV programmes could be categorized as low intensity SMS message programs and high intensity SMS message programs.

Whereas some programs (especially phone-in) called for the SMS messages only at the end of the program with a puzzle or question in respect of a specific product of the brand being aired to the viewers, some programs called for the SMS messages for each part of the tele serial or part of a film shown on the small screen. In all such open calls for the SMS messages, an incentive is provided for the first 10 SMS messages received and the results were announced at the end. Time limitation for receiving the SMS messages is also given to increase the intensity of the inflow of the messages.

There are some music channels (like Gemini, Maa, Teja, etc) which run 24x7 hour music programs during which time a variety of topics, some of which include the birthdays of film actors and directors, have been dealt with. The viewers have been invited to share or send their sentiments on the given topics through SMS messages. These channels even display the SMS messages received in the scrolling live. But the SMS messages received on these programs are not rewarded.

Further some entertainment channels do have birth day greetings as part of every day programs and they do keep inviting the SMS messages on the occasion for their kith and kin. Even such messages keep scrolling on the screen at the bottom line. Of all the entertainment programs beamed on the TV screens, the reality shows are more high intensity SMS message programs. They require on day to day basis and episode to episode basis high intensity SMS messaging. But, the SMS messages sent to the reality shows would not be rewarded at all.

Similarly the high intensity SMS messaging is often found when the viewers have been asked to exercise their options with regard to their favorite films/ heroes/ heroines/ technicians etc. This kind of involvement of viewers through SMS messaging is even done for selecting the best small screen heroes/ heroines/ anchors/ serials also. Even as this being considered as democratization of media the process per se is a non-incentive to the participating voters.

In the case of news channels also the viewers have been asked to send the SMS messages to express their views on a given debate, a panel discussion or an issue of concern. In all such open invitations, the SMS messaging is non-incentive. But, the news channels too provide for the live scrolling of the SMS messages received on an issue. Sometimes, the SMS messages have been displayed/ flashed immediately on the screen for the participants in the debate or in panel to pick up or address the question in the SMS message. This is what we tried to describe as democratization. The intensity with which the SMS messages have been sent to a given program is considered as an index of democratization.

For instance the NDTV used the SMS message opinion survey for getting the Jessica Lal murder case trial reopened and conducted by the Delhi High Court on day to day business which ultimately brought the guilty to book. Today the SMS messages are being used for eliciting the public opinion in choosing the best films, best actors and actresses, songs, lyricist, musicians, cameraman, etc by the Film Fare, Femina, Film Goers' Film Awards, etc which are giving away awards on annual basis for the film industry.

As pointed out earlier there is an obvious quid pro quo relationship in terms of media economy between the television channels and the sponsors of the various brands. The increasing involvement of viewers through SMS messages clearly shows a link between media economy and an index of increasing democratization.

As detailed in the objectives, the media economy angle of quid pro quo relationship shared between television channels and the FMCG products has an unseen dimension to it, which is benefitting the telecom service providers both in terms of enhancing their images and augmenting their revenues.

If one looks at the current sponsorship scenario of the television programs being aired now, some of the programs are sponsored directly by the telecom service providers themselves though there are FMCGs as cosponsors too. This important development has led to the establishment of a number of entertainment production units such as Pyramid Saimira entertainments Limited, which began to produce the entertainment programs with the sponsorship of the FMCG Brands. Programs such as, Idea Super Singer, AirTel Super Singer, Sa Re Ga Ma Pa, Dhee, Dance baby Dance, Challenge, etc are being run on television screens across India in various languages with the sponsorship from the FMCG Brands in all of which the SMS messaging has been the crucial criteria to declare the winners and runner ups.

Though there are so many controversies involving the ethics in finalizing the winners and runners in a given reality show using the SMS messages, the present paper limits itself to the extent the SMS messaging is involving the viewers and consequent democratization of programs beamed by the television channels. Whether the high intensity SMS messaging truly reflects the index of democratization is to be examined on an issue to issue basis and a sweeping rule cannot be formulated based on stray incidents of controversies.

### Limitations of the Study

The study being the first of its kind and based on simple observations of TV programs using the SMS messaging suffers from certain limitations as outlined below:

1. Unavailability of data from the television channels with regard to the SMS messages received for each of the programs.
2. Unavailability of the revenue data from the telecom service providers for the SMS messages sent through their specific code for each TV channel/program.
3. The general data shown as increased SMS message revenue of the telecom service providers does not give any



details with respect to specific program or television channel.

4. The study needs further collaboration through indirect/direct sources of the brand sponsors with regard to the gains achieved through the SMS messaging.
5. Hopefully as more research trickles down on this integrated marketing communication segment, more literature might be available for the research which perhaps help in formulating better research questions or hypotheses.

## Conclusion

The use of SMS messages in the last one decade in the television programs of entertainment and the news has unveiled a totally new area of integrated marketing communication. It is not a simple advertising promotion as it prima facie looks to be. A deeper study into showed that the SMS messaging has become a multiplier of media economy a benefit which was initially not intended to. The initial intention of the SMS messaging was to involve the viewers and enhance the TRPs. But, soon the television channels and the brand image seekers realized that the SMS messaging can be used for both multiplying of media

economy and democratization. In the process, the telecom providers unintentionally received a double advantage of boosting their own brand image and augment their revenues too. The present study only tried to sum up this process based on simple observation and categorization of the phenomenon and calls for a deeper study with the availability of more data.

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Fig.2  
Flow Chat of Categorization of Programs Using SMS Messages in TV Channels

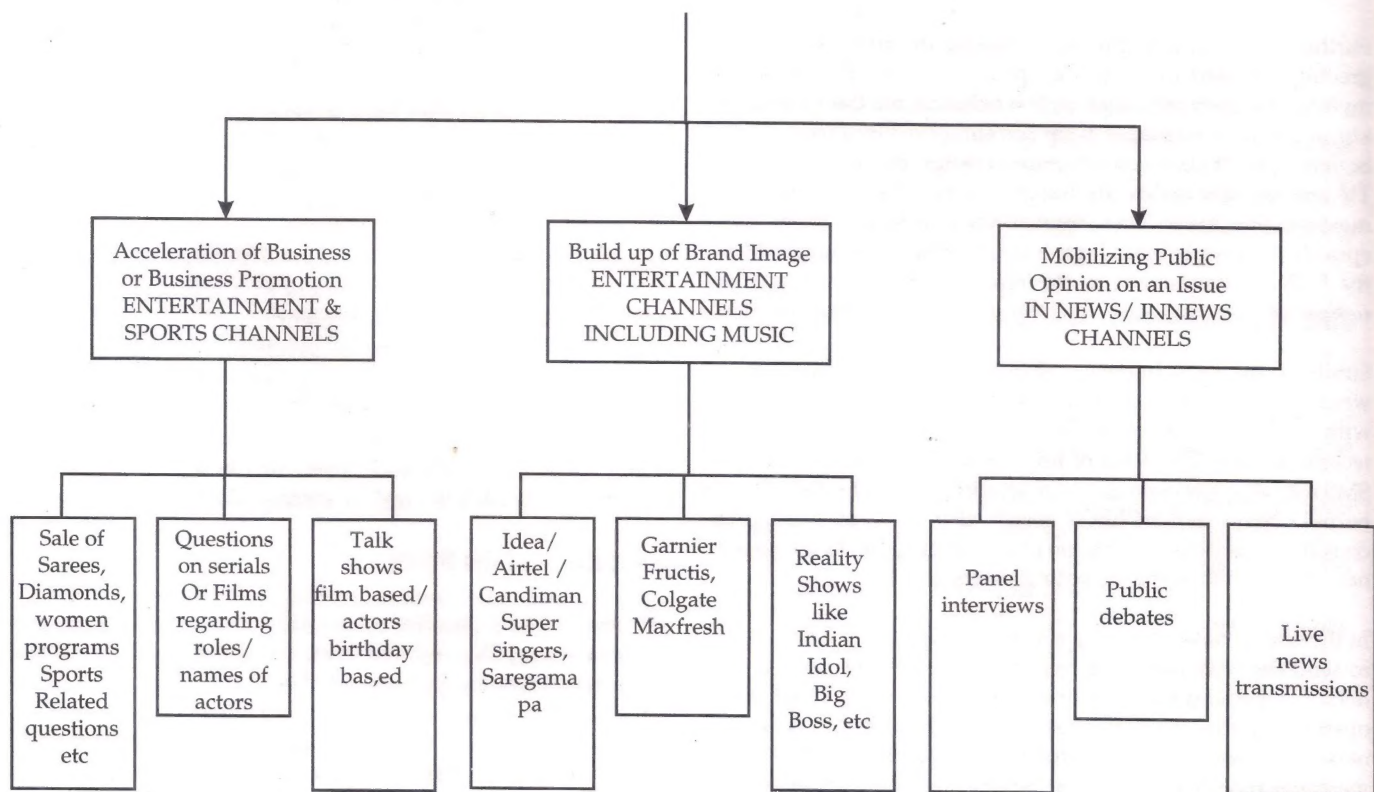


Fig. 3  
Model showing the SMS Messaging used to achieve a four fold  
Strategy of Integrated Marketing Communications

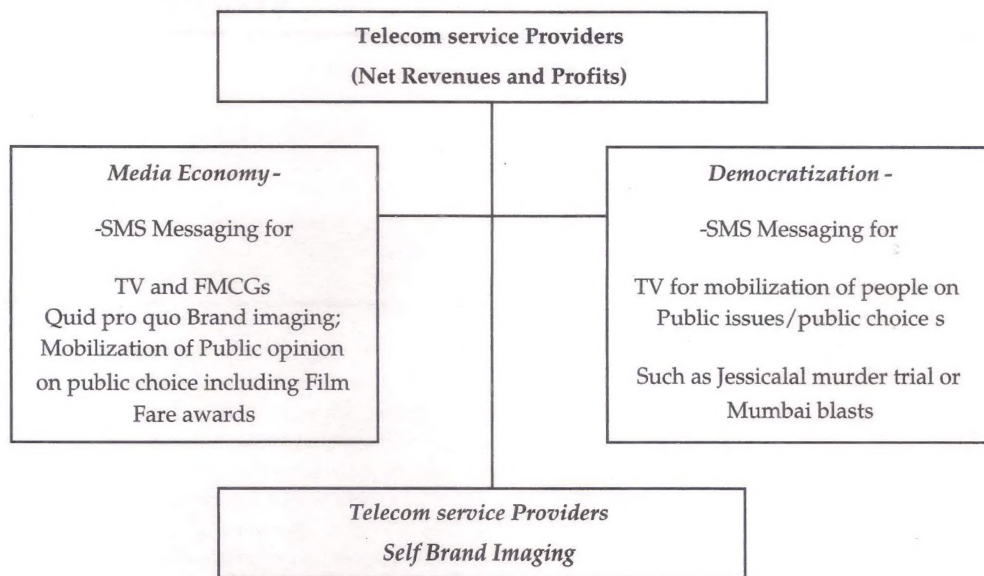


Fig. 4.  
Model Showing Conceptual Outcomes of SMS Messaging

